

# Brethren Evangelist

"I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life."—Jesus

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## The Literature for the Times

(Read at National Conference by the Editor)

If the originator of this theme contemplated the literature which is characteristic of the times, it would remind us of the story of the poor old woman, who from the stint and starvation of slum poverty was carried one day on a charity excursion far out at sea. When she gazed for the first time upon the wide waters, a sigh of deep satisfaction escaped her, and she exclaimed, "Thank God there is something that there's enough of." There is certainly enough of the literature which is made to suit the times, but we doubt whether, either in respect to quantity or quality, there is any loud call for thanksgiving to God for it. Wise old Solomon uttered an exclamation of impatience at the vast multiplication of books in his day. But fancy the royal philosopher contemplating the periodical literature of our times, the papers and magazines innumerable, representing the fads, theories, philosophies, religions, schemes and vagaries indescribable, with sophistries, lies, lunacies, vulgarities, puerilities and frivolities unspeakable. An artist of great genius might possibly transfer to canvas a faint picture of his amazement and disgust.

But it is with this astounding redundancy of literary superficiality that we have to deal. The literature which is most needed for the times must first take into account the literature which is the *product* of the times. Some one has said that this is the age of the commonplace. We would vary the outline by calling it the age of cultivated mediocrity. The wide diffusion of education, and the mental stimulus which comes with it has created a vast literature distinguished for nothing except its attractive external polish. An unprecedented number of people write well so far as the rules of composition are concerned, an incalculable number of periodicals afford a brief publicity to this ephemeral literature, the millions who have time to read give all that time to the yellow journals, the illustrated papers, the exceedingly attractive magazines, the purveyors of fiction *ad libitum*, and the result is pernicious literary dissipation, universal in its range, and fatal to all healthy moral and mental development. An intellectual and moral medioc-

rity producing a shallow and sensational literature, however highly polished, is not likely to be improved by feeding upon the fruit of its own vine. The diffusion of a vice creates an increasing demand for the aliment upon which it feeds, and this in turn contributes to the more rapid and wider diffusion of the vice. And since a literary dissipation, like all other forms of dissipation, is extremely profitable to those who minister to it, the powerful commercial instinct of the times lends its most irresistible impulse to this latest and most insidious form of evil.

The late Mr. Robert Bonner of New York built up a fortune of six million dollars because he was the first to "recognize that characteristic of human nature that there is hardly anything better loved than a tale, and that men and women will deny themselves food and make many sacrifices if they can only have this craving gratified." While it is true that he was a religious man who did not allow the commercial instinct to wholly dominate his conscience, and while it is also true that he was careful to attend to the moral tone of the stories published in his paper, nevertheless he was the first to pay large prices for fiction, and by forcing competitors to adopt the same policy, he introduced into story writing the powerful incentive of pecuniary reward, both for writer and publisher, so that those reformers who are able to see that it is a great and growing evil find themselves confronted with a colossus who bestrides the world. We devote so much attention to the discussion of fiction for the reason that it is the dominant literary feature of the times. There is a wholesome fiction which is profoundly permeated with the verisimilitude of truth, either in sentiment or experience, but the vast preponderance of fiction published now a days possesses no verisimilitude to any truth that is in the heaven, or in the earth, or under the earth. It is a tissue of lies saturated with lies and swimming in a seething sea of lies. If the devil is the father of lies, we immediately arrive at the conclusion that the vast majority of the fiction of our day is congenial to his nature and favorable to his policy. Let us observe also another characteristic of

this literature, that it seeks above all else the patronage of boys and girls, young men and young women. Recently an attempt was made by two powerful journalists of London to introduce the Sunday newspaper into that metropolis, which attempt however was happily defeated by the powerful religious sentiment brought to bear against it. The incident which for a time attracted international attention brought prominently forward the personality of Mr. Alfred Harmsworth, proprietor of the Daily Mail, who ten years ago was penniless, but now possesses an income of more than \$1,000,000 a year. Of this man and of his enterprise a writer in the Review of Reviews says: "The secret of the success of papers of this class has been the resolute appeal that they have made to the young men and women who have passed and are passing thru the elementary schools of the country. To these they offer from sixteen to thirty pages of stories, personal paragraphs, and desultory trivialities of every kind, carefully avoiding everything that could demand sustained attention or even awaken a moment's serious thought." The same writer also says of this same publisher, whose boast is that he can draw his check for \$2,000,000, that his policy as a publisher is "without a spark of sympathy for any movement animated by great convictions or lofty ideals." Who can contemplate this vast propaganda or damnation among the young without a shudder of horror? This man Harmsworth whose very name curiously suggests the quality of his condition that harm and worth, expressed in dollars and cents, are joined together in a profitable partnership in this world, is but one of many hundreds, perhaps thousands, who for the money it brings them are consciously poisoning the very fountains of our social life, and vastly multiplying the race of those who fill themselves with the husks which are hardly fit for swine, only to be conscious of a more intense craving for more husks, a false and pitiable appetite which hopelessly debases the whole moral and intellectual nature, rendering impossible the development of a normal and wholesome manhood and womanhood.

In view of all this melancholy revelation certainly the literature for the times is first of all that which can successfully supplant the literature of the times. It is useless for